The Red Shoes

Once there was a poor motherless child who had rags for a dress and no shoes at all. But the child saved cloth scraps wherever she found them and over time she sewed for herself a pair of shoes, which she stained red with the juice of berries. These shoes were very crude but she loved them and they made her feel rich even though her days were spent gathering food in the thorny woods until far past dark and even though many evenings she was tired and cold and hungry.

But one day as she trudged down the road in her rags and her red shoes a gilded carriage pulled up beside her. And inside was an old woman who told her she was going to take her home and treat her as her own child. So to the wealthy woman's house they went and the child's hair was washed and combed in a great large blue ribbon put into it and she was given the purest whitest undergarments and a fine gray wool dress. And the whitest of white stockings and the shiniest of shiny black shoes. When the child asked, "Where are my old clothes and and especially my red shoes?" the old woman said the clothes were so filthy and the shoes so ridiculous that she had thrown them into the fire, they were burnt to ashes and not to worry about it anymore don't think about it you have something far better.

But the child felt very sad even with all the riches surrounding. Those red shoes made by her own hands, stitched together from scraps that she had found, it had given her great happiness. And now she was made to sit still all the time, to walk and to never skip, and to never run, and not to speak unless spoken to, and to be seen but not heard. But a secret fire began to burn in her heart and she continued to yearn for her old red shoes more than anything.

She became old enough shortly to be confirmed on the day of the innocence, and the old woman took her to an old crippled shoemaker to have a special pair of shoes made for the occasion. But in the shoemaker's case was already a pair of red shoes made of the finest Moroccan leather, and there they stood, and they were so beautiful they practically glowed. So, even though shoes such as these would be scandalous for the ceremony at church, the old woman's eyesight was failing and so, when the child said, "I would like to have those", the old woman could not see the color. And so she paid the shoemaker for them and the shoemaker gave a wink to the child as he wrapped the shoes in the package.

The next day at church, church members talked and whispered back and forth about the shoes that this child was wearing. My god, they were brilliant red, they were red like polished apples. Everyone disapproved but the child. The child loved the red of the shoes for it reminded her of her own lost shoes so, when the pontiff intoned, and the choir hummed, and the organ pumped, the child was turning her feet this way and that, admiring the red shoes.

By the end of the day the old woman had been informed many many times about the little girl's red shoes and she took them off her feet, and she put them away in the closet, and she said, "Never, never wear those shoes again!". But the next Sunday the child couldn't help but sneak into the closet, take down the shoes and walk to church beside the old woman. This time, at the door to the church was an old soldier with his arm in a sling and he wore a little jacket, and he had a red beard that was pointed at the end. He bowed and he asked permission to dust the child's little shoes off, and the child held out her foot, and he tapped the soles of her shoes with a little wigga jig jig song that made the soles of her feet itch. "Remember to stay for the dance," he said to her. He smiled and he winked.

And again in the church everyone looked askance at the girls red shoes. But she loved them because they were bright like crimson, they were bright like raspberries, they were bright like pomegranates, and she could hardly think of anything else. She could not hear the people around her whispering, she could not hear the sermon, she could not hear the choir. She was in love with this color and they so reminded her of those shoes, of the ones that she had lost.

As she and the old woman left the church, the injured soldier who had tapped the dust off her shoes earlier called out and said, "Oh, what beautiful dancing shoes you have on, girl!" His words made the girl take a few little twirls right there and then. But once her feet had begun to move, they would not stop, and she danced through the flower beds and around the corner of the church until it seemed as though she had lost complete control of herself. She did a gavotte and then a Csárdás and then waltzed by herself through the fields, across the way.

The old woman's coachmen jumped up and ran after her and picked her up, and carried her back to the carriage, but the girl's feet in the red shoes were still dancing in the air as though they were still on the ground. The old woman and the coachman tugged, and they pulled, and they tried to pry the red shoes off. It was such a sight, all hats askew, and kicking legs, and petticoats, but at last the child's feet were calmed and the shoes were off.

They returned home, and the old woman slammed the red shoes down on the top shelf of the closet and said to the child, "Never, never touch these again!" But the girl could not help opening the closet door a crack and peering in to see them glowing there, in the dark and longing filled her. To her they were still the most beautiful things and the most beautiful color on the face of the earth.

Not long after the old woman took ill, and as the doctors left and pronounced there to be no hope, the girl crept across the room and into the closet where the red shoes were kept. She glanced up at them so high on the shelf, and her glance became a gaze, like a person in love, and her gaze became a powerful desire, like a person in love so much so, that the girl took the shoes from the shelf and fastened them on, feeling it would do no harm just for a while, just for a little bit, not for very long. But as soon as the shoes touched her heels and her toes, she was overcome by the urge to move, to sway, and to dance.

And so out the door she danced, and down the steps, and first in a gavotte, and then a Csárdás, and then in big daring waltz turns in rapid succession. The girl was in her glory and she did not realize she was in trouble until she wanted to dance to the left, and the shoes danced to the right, until she wanted to dance down the center, and the shoes danced her backward. And the shoes danced her, and danced her round and round. And they insisted on dancing straight ahead, and as the shoes danced the girl, rather than the girl dancing in the shoes, they danced her right down the road through the muddy fields, and out into the dark and gloomy forest, and in between the trees, and you could see her going in between the staves of the trees whirling and twirling.

There against a tree was the old soldier with a red beard and his arm in a sling, and he was dressed in his little jacket with his red pointed beard, and he said, "Oh, what beautiful dancing shoes." And terrified, suddenly feeling illness and omens, she tried to pull the shoes off, but as much as she tugged and as much as she pulled, the shoes stayed faster so they were glued to her very flesh. She hopped on one foot, and then the other trying to take off the shoes, but her one foot on the ground kept dancing even so, and her other foot in her hand did it's part of the dance also.

And so dance and dance and dance she did. Over the highest hills and through the valleys in the rain, in the snow and in the sunlight she danced. And she danced in the darkest night, and through the sunrise, and through the sunset, and she was still dancing in the next twilight as well. But it was

not good dancing. It was terrible dancing, it was horrible dancing and there was no rest for her.

She danced into a churchyard and there a spirit of dread would not allow her to enter. The spirit pronounced these words over her, "You shall dance in your red shoes until you become like a wraith, like a ghost, till your skin hangs from your bones, till there is nothing left of you but entrails dancing. You shall dance door to door through all the villages and you shall strike each door three times and when people peer out they will see you and fear your fate for themselves. So dance red shoes, you shall dance."

The girl begged for mercy, but before she could plead further, her red shoes carried her away. Over the briar she danced, through the streams and over the hedgerows and on and on, over the dead falls, dancing, still dancing till she came to her old house and there were mourners there. The old woman who had taken her in had died. Yet even so, she danced on by, and dance she did, as dance she must. In abject exhaustion and horror she danced into the forest where lived the executioner. And the axe on his wall felt her coming and began to tremble as it sensed her coming nearer, and nearer.

"Please!" she begged the executioner as she danced by his door. "Please cut off my shoes to free me from this horrid fate." And the executioner cut through the straps of the red shoes with his axe. But still the shoes stayed on her feet. And so she cried to him that her life was not worth living, and please, please to cut off her feet. And the red shoes continuing to cling to her feet so that nothing else could be done, the executioner raised his axe and severed her feet from her body. And the red shoes with the feet in them kept on dancing through the forest and over the hill and out of sight. And were it not so horrible, it might be laughable but it is not, and now the girl was a poor cripple, and had to find her own way in the world as a servant to others, and she never, ever again wished for red shoes and she never, ever again danced.